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ABSTRACT

A random sample of U.S. television news directors was surveyed by mail in the spring of 1973 concerning hiring practices, the college training they felt was helpful for potential employees, and specific reasons they had for hiring personnel during the past year. The directors also were asked to report the ratings of their evening newscast and to indicate the reasons they felt were behind the ratings. The data indicate that the major sources of personnel for television news departments are other television news departments and college broadcast journalism sequences. The directors cite courses in broadcast reporting, local and state government, and speaking and rhetoric as preferable for broadcast journalists to courses in newspaper writing skills, psychology, and some sociology courses. Reasons for hiring specific personnel stress the social characteristics of the candidate without making reference to educational background. The directors suggest that good visuals or good air presentation and good news coverage are most important to achieving high news program ratings, but also note that poor signal strength and a lack of staff, among other things, can hurt ratings. (Author/TO)

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A recent survey of television news directors confirms the fact university broadcast journalism curricula continue to be a major source of personnel for television news departments. The 192 television news directors answering the mail survey report 20% of the total 385 full time news personnel they hired in 1972 came directly from college broadcast journalism training. The percentage was exceeded by only one other source; other television news departments. The latter supplied 23% of last year's total number of hirings. Only 12% came to television news from radio news departments, and even smaller numbers moved in from non-news television (11%), non-news radio (9%), non-journalism college (8%), newspapers (6%), and college newspaper journalism (4%). A miscellany of public relations jobs, training and business sources account for the other hirings.

While the directors indicated the number of full time news people hired fell from 1972's 385 to 190 in 1973, they also indicate the percentage of new graduates hired was higher. The directors said forty-three percent, or 82, of those they planned to hire could have come from the campus. Projecting these figures on to the national scene suggests the current 694 commercial television stations intended hiring approximately 700 full time news people during 1973. If the directors hired the estimated 43% of their newsmen from the campus 301 new grads won television news jobs last year.

This research, part of a larger survey, was supported by funds from the School of Journalism at Ohio State University. It was mailed to a random sample of television news directors drawn from Broadcasting Yearbook. Twenty-six of the directors indicated they also had radio news responsibilities. Five stations reported they had no news department. A return of 66% accumulated following two mailings.

Analysis of the returns indicates the news directors' hiring practices vary according to their budgets and/or staff size. The categories are as follows:

(1) Budget less than $50,000, staff average 2, N=48.

(2) Budget $50,000 to $99,999, staff average 5, N=33.

(3) Budget $100,000 to $199,999, staff average 7, N=55.

(4) Budget $200,000 to $299,999, staff average 16, N=28.

(5) Budget $300,000 and above, staff average 30, N=28.

The sizeable news departments in category (4) seem most likely to accomodate the new journalism graduate looking for his first job. Thirty-two percent of the total hired by these departments in 1972 came from broadcast journalism training. These 28 directors also had plans to hire 59% (23) of their new people from the campus in 1973. The group averaged hiring one college graduate each in 1972, and half of them said they could hire one or more new graduates in 1973.

Directors in category (2) averaged hiring more than one new person each in 1972. And while 21 of the 35 positions they have open, 60%, could have gone to 1973 college graduates, there are 33 directors reporting in this category, indicating they will hire less than one new graduate per department. Half of these directors indicated they were willing to hire from the campus in 1973, however.

The large stations in category (5) seem less inclined to hire the new graduate. These 28 news directors hired 3 full time news people each in 1972, but only 18%, of 17 of the total of 91, came directly from broadcast journalism courses. The directors estimated only 19% would come from the campus in 1973. Three-fourths of these directors had no plans to hire from the campus. Those who did were the smaller departments in the category. By-and-large these directors hire their news personnel from other television news departments. Forty percent (36) of those hired in 1972 came from that source, denoting the experience demanded of applicants in these large departments.

Less than one-third of the 103 news directors in categories

(1) and (3) had plans to hire new graduates in 1973. The 48 directors in category (1), and the 55 directors in category (3) had plans to hire only 64 newsmen in 1973 (27 and 37 respectively), with only 28 of these coming from the campus. Many departments in category (1) are "director only" operations. Some are UHF stations struggling in a VHF market. But, it's not clear from the questionnaires why category (3) departments are not as active in the job market at this time.

What kind of college courses do television news directors prefer in the grads they hire? One question was included in the survey to gain an idea. Directors were asked to rate 17 courses in journalism, history, sociology, and political science on a scale from 0 to 100 (extremely unimportant to extremely important), and to rate them according to the "importance of each of these subjects to a college student who might apply for a job in your department." Space was provided for the news directors to add courses as they wished.

Courses rated at 75 and above by the largest percentages of the news directors are listed below. Almost 80% of the directors rate broadcast reporting skills as "important!"

78% Broadcast reporting skills

54% Local and state government

52% Speaking and rhetoric

48% Television production skills

47% Copy editing skills

44% Motion picture skills

Courses rated "unimportant," or at 25 or below, by large percentages of the news directors were as follows:

41% Newspaper writing skills

44% Psychology

45% Criminology

50% Courses in social movements

Only 39 of the news directors suggested additional courses in the space allotted. Thirty-three (17%) of the 192 directors added courses emphasizing broadcast or television writing, or "writing" and "grammar" courses. The remaining suggestions included specialized subject areas such as "law," "business," "agriculture," "English," "Propaganda," and "Political Science."

Courses in essay writing, state history, constitutional history and effects of mass communications drew "mixed" ratings with about one-third of the directors rating them high, one-third low, and one-third in the middle.

Thus the directors see television news skills and local and state government courses as important, vary in opinion on the value of state and national history and communications theory courses and see "hard core" social science as unimportant, along with work in newspaper writing skills.

Further indications of the news directors' values were requested in a question which asked them to discuss the "most important reasons behind" the rating their early evening newscast held.

The largest percentage of the 303 reasons given (16%) denote the directors' interest in newscast air presentation. "Good visuals," or good air format were factors cited often in these comments. Almost as many remarks (14%) indicated a concern and interest in local news coverage (including "leg work," and "shoe leather.") Quality in the content itself was a factor in 13% of the remarks with attributes of "thoroughness" and "professionalism" mentioned.

Remarks concerning facilities and staffing made up 12% of the total number of comments. Often the remarks were regrets of lack of staff, camera equipment, or poor signal strength, and included notations of "UHF in a VHF market." At the same time many of the directors saw audience habit, or station and newscast tenure as a factor in the ratings. These factors (10%) generally attribute good or bad ratings to the belief good ratings go to established newscasts and cannot be changed quickly even with excellent production, coverage or reporting. To several of the directors, programming factors were important. These remarks (9%) noted the network helped or did not help pull news audiences. Some felt their time slot, lead-in programming, or entertainment program competition to be a factor.

The remaining remarks were scattered into 8 categories with a few directors citing "good personnel" (5%), others praising or regretting their anchorman (5%), recommending newscast promotion or noting management's important presence.

Considering these remarks it is easy to see why the directors would prefer the college graduate with the broadcast journalism skills courses selected above.

Other factors may be more important in the hiring practices than course training, however. To investigate what they might be the news directors were asked to describe what factors were important in the hiring of any newsmen they actually hired from the campus in 1972.

Of the 157 remarks given, a few (8%) specifically mentioned broadcast writing skills as a major factor in hiring. A few (8%) noted higher education was a factor. These included "liberal arts background" or "good grades," or "speech and television training," specifically. The master's degree was mentioned three times. Only one director specifically mentioned broadcast journalism training. The directors reported these factors immediately following the rating of the educational course work. This proximity may have reduced the number of remarks indicating education as being important in hiring.

The comments given, however, suggest the directors may value the candidate's personal factors as much as his education. The largest number of comments (35%) suggested the work ethic and social characteristics were the most important factors in the hiring of news personnel in 1972.

"Dedication," "desire," "dedicated to news," "willing to work," "no prima donna," and "willing to learn," indicate the thrust of these comments. Close by were self-presentation values such as "good grooming," "nice appearance," and "could speak well," including "looked good on camera," for a 11% total.

Another 9% of the remarks centered around perceived ability: "intelligent," "curious," "news sense," "common sense," and "potential," while 11% noted experience in film or air work.

Nine directors hired personnel because the new people were either Black or female. (None of these came from journalism programs.) Four newsmen came from intern or training programs the television company had established. Four others were local people and hired because they knew the market. The directors say two were hired following recommendations by college professors.

When television news departments hire the new graduate they most likely hire him as a reporter. Of the 1,969 full time working staff members in the survey newsrooms, 424, or 39%, function primarily under that title. Only 14% (146) are called "editor" and only 15% are primarily anchormen. In the questionnaire, "full time" was defined as 35 or more hours of work per week. About 25% of the full time staff were cameramen. The most common "doubling up" job were film and air work. Camera or film work (but no processing) was mentioned 426 times as a double up job. Anchorman was listed 251 times. No other partial or "double up" position--sales, promotion, management, programming, continuity, etc., received more than 14 mentions.

In summary we can say the broadcast journalism major looking for his first job in the news business might seek employment in news departments with staffs of about 5 newsmen or with those of about 16 newsmen. Large department news directors

(with staffs of 30 or more) will probably expect more television news experience than the new graduate can provide. Other stations may be hiring, but not with the frequency of the two best groups.

The directors, interested in good air presentation, good news coverage, and quality in news content, will favor the graduate who can write, work in film and on-the-air. Perhaps the most important factors for him to possess would be desire, dedication to the news profession, willingness to work, curiosity and common sense.

For many in journalism education the findings reported here will revive old arguments about the content of the journalism curriculum. Many will find proof here of the need for more skills training. Others will question the use of the news directors' ratings as a valid guide to curriculum planning. Those leaning toward the traditional arguments for extensive skills education should consider the fact most of the news directors considered newspaper writing courses less important to job candidates than speech and rhetoric. Many may be surprised most of the directors also found newspaper writing less important than the "effects of mass communications."

The late Chilton Bush once noted that "competency in journalistic skills at the time of graduation makes the graduate a competent beginner." Extensive training in "substantive non-professional fields," he felt, made the graduate better "in the long run."

The question might be posed as follows: "How can we make competent beginners who are good in the long run?" One clue may be in the tendency for most of the news directors to rate course work on local and state government as "important" to those they would hire, and the remarks of a small number of them that candidates were hired because they knew the local market.

This seems to be the best direction this survey can offer regarding the planning of the broadcast newsman's curriculum. It is easy to forget that the broadcast journalist is primarily a local newsman. Course work in urban development, transportation, or urban politics might be more useful to him, and his news director, and his public, than those stimulating and respected courses in Shakespeare, clinical psychology, U.S. frontier history, collective behavior, or film criticism.

Certainly exploration of this "local" angle is warranted as research and discussion of the broadcast journalism curriculum continues.